

THE AUSTRALIAN

A giant of Australian jazz has passed away



John Pochée at the drums, with his longtime colleague alto saxophonist Bernie McGann in the background... PHOTO COURTESY LLOYD SWANTON

OBITUARY: JOHN POCHÉE

Jazz musician and bandleader. Born Sydney, September 21, 1940. Died Sydney, November 10, 2022, aged 82.

ERIC MYERS

Of the contemporary jazz musicians active since WW2, few were more significant than the drummer and bandleader John Pochée. He began his working life as a copy boy at the *Sydney Morning Herald* but, by

the time he was 18, had committed himself to music at a time in the late 1950s when modern jazz in Sydney was in its infancy.

An older generation of modernists epitomized by Don Burrows had emerged in the post-WW2 decade, their music to a great extent reflecting the swing era of the late 1930s. The result was an accessible style of mainstream jazz which largely accounted for Burrows' subsequent popularity.

Pochée belonged to a slightly younger generation which emerged ten years later during the 50s. They preferred jazz with a harder edge than the smooth, West Coast Burrows approach. Musicians such as Pochée, alto saxophonist Bernie McGann, and pianist Dave Levy related best to the music of African American groups such as Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers. They congregated first at a small venue in Newtown the Mocambo but, as early as 1958, performed at the El Rocco in Kings Cross, which became the centre for progressive jazz during the 60s.



L-R, Pochée and pianist Dave Levy, performing at The Basement in 1975 in an early version of The Last Straw; bassist Jack Thorncraft is obscured behind Levy... PHOTO COURTESY SHIRLEY POCHÉE

In many ways Pochée's career reflected this dichotomy between the popular but arguably safe music of Burrows and his colleagues, which dominated Australian jazz, while more adventurous groups associated with Pochée, often struggled for recognition. This situation transpired until the 1980s when arts funding authorities increasingly recognised the artistic worth of those groups and levelled the playing field.

The groups which included Pochée were always a who's who of highly creative musicians, whose achievements were championed in the media by the influential critic John Clare. The Heads for example, active in the mid-60s, included pianist Dave MacRae and saxophonist Bob Bertles, as well as McGann, and was a precursor to the later Bernie McGann Quartet.



Pochée (left) performing with The Heads at the Fat Black Pussycat in Melbourne in 1964 with double bassist Andy Brown... PHOTO COURTESY JOHN POCHÉE

In the 70s Pochée was for five years a member of the hard-hitting Judy Bailey Quartet which toured internationally with Australian government support. In 1974 Pochée formed his own hard-bop quintet The Last Straw, which lasted for 25 years until 1999.



The Judy Bailey Quartet (above), snapped while on tour in Asia, L-R, Ron Philpott, Bailey, Col Loughnan, unidentified official, John Pochée... PHOTO COURTESY SHIRLEY POCHÉE



Pochée's quintet The Last Straw, which existed from 1974 to 1999, L-R, Tony Esterman, Lloyd Swanton, Ken James, Bernie McGann, Pochée...PHOTO COURTESY TONY ESTERMAN

In the 80s, with an increasingly sympathetic context for more innovative jazz, two groups with Pochée on drums came to the fore: the Bernie McGann Trio and Ten Part Invention.



The Bernie McGann Trio, L-R, John Pochée, McGann, Lloyd Swanton...

TPI owes its existence to far-sighted arts festival director Anthony Steel who wished to have an innovative jazz component on the program of his last Adelaide Arts Festival in 1986. It was he who commissioned Pochée to form Ten Part Invention to perform at the festival.



Adelaide Arts Festival director Anthony Steel, who commissioned John Pochée to form Ten Part Invention...

It was always Pochée's dream to create a band with the loose, flexible rhythm section characteristic of a small group, with original music written for brass and saxophone sections over the top by talented composers within the band.

As Pochée quipped in 2017 when accepting the APRA/AMCOS award for Distinguished Services to Australian Music, "I got sick of listening to *A String of Pearls*". Those compositions which most characterised the original sound of TPI were written by Roger Frampton, who died in 2000, Miroslav Bukovsky and Sandy Evans, both still with the band today.



Pochée, on the night he received the 2017 APRA/AMCOS Art Music Award for Distinguished Services to Australian Music... PHOTO CREDIT TONY MOTT

Pochée was able to take TPI's unique music into the international arena. A 1994 tour in South East Asia was followed in 1998 by the Philippines, China and Taiwan. In 1997 the Bernie McGann Trio performed at the prestigious Chicago Jazz Festival. Pochée took TPI to the same festival in 2004, going on to gigs at

universities and jazz clubs, and performing at the John F Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington DC.



Ten Part Invention, back row L-R, Sandy Evans, Steve Elphick, John Pochée, James Greening, Ken James, Warwick Alder, Bob Bertles; crouching in front, L-R, Miroslav Bukovsky, Roger Frampton, Bernie McGann...PHOTO COURTESY SHIRLEY POCHÉE

Pochée said that Ten Part Invention “had to be a band with no egos, and where everyone was there for each other”. Even though the group was full of musicians who led their own bands, and some key members such as McGann and Ken James died, Pochée kept this band together for over 30 years.

Brilliant replacements were always found, including pianist Paul McNamara, and saxophonists Andrew Robson, Paul Cutlan, and John Mackey. TPI is still performing, with its iconic brass section - trumpeters Miroslav Bukovsky and Warwick Alder plus trombonist James Greening - intact.

A significant outcome of the TPI phenomenon was the emergence of the band’s rhythm section, known as The Engine Room, as a unique force in its own right. In 1989 Roger Frampton (piano & saxophones), Steve Elphick (double bass)

and Pochée (drums) toured the Soviet Union, the first Western group to appear there since Glasnost.



The Engine Room in Leningrad in 1989, L-R, John Pochée, Russian interpreter Dima, Steve Elphick, Roger Frampton... PHOTO CREDIT ERIC MYERS

As guests of the Soviet Jazz Federation for three weeks, the trio was embedded in Soviet jazz culture, and did countless concerts, jazz education workshops, and jam sessions with leading Soviet musicians in various cities. Frampton was celebrated as a giant of jazz piano while Pochée, courtesy of his unique style - he was a left-handed drummer playing on a right-handed kit – mesmerised the best drummers in the Soviet Union.

Lloyd Swanton, the bassist who played alongside Pochée for many years in both the Bernie McGann Trio and The Last Straw, expressed on Facebook feelings widely shared by members of the Australian jazz community: “So sad to hear of John's passing. What a man, irrepressible and irreplaceable. A volcano of energy on stage and off. Gregarious, hilarious, larger than life. So many stories. I will miss you dreadfully mate.”



Lloyd Swanton, performing in Leningrad in 1990 with The Last Straw... PHOTO CREDIT EVGENY RASKOPOV

In early November Pochée had a fall in his apartment and was taken by ambulance to Prince of Wales Hospital where a serious brain haemorrhage was diagnosed. He was placed in ICU in an induced coma, but never regained full consciousness and died on November 10. He is survived by his wife Shirley Elizabeth Pochée, his sister Shirley Pochée/Bagwell, his daughter Lani Welling, and two grandchildren Emily and Jack.
